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ABSTRACT

A study examined the writing practices, attitudes, and beliefs about the importance of writing at work of "basic" writers and "strong" writers. Subjects were graduates of Francis Marion College for the years 1984 to 1989. Questionnaires were returned by 119 of the 182 basic writers (identified through placement in remedial English, repetition of required English courses, and lower-than-C averages in required English courses) and by 47 of the 62 strong writers, who earned only A's in required English courses. Results indicated that: (1) most respondents in both groups had sought majors and jobs for reasons unrelated to writing ability; (2) most frequently done types of writing were short and repetitive; and (3) most of the former basic writers believed they were writing adequately for their jobs and felt satisfied with their ability. Examination of writing samples indicated that the former basic writers' purposes for writing are inseparable from the subject matter, audience, writer's persona, and the resulting text. Findings suggest that: (1) writing teachers need to reduce as much as possible the artificiality of the writing class and provide student writers with real audiences and real purposes for writing; and (2) that freshman English courses should not be used as screening devices which cull weaker writers from college during the first year. Writing teachers need to remember that they see only one cross-section of their students' overall abilities. (Two tables and three charts of data, a figure illustrating J. Kinneavey's model of academic communication, a model of workplace communication, and three samples of workplace writing are attached.) (RS)

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ED 374 419

A MORE FAVORABLE CONTEXT: WHAT FORMER BASIC WRITERS REPORT ABOUT WRITING ON THE JOB

Eleanor Agnew

Paper presented at the 1992 Conference on College Composition and Communication, Cincinnati, Ohio

Four years ago, I had a student I will call "Jim", who was a very weak writer. I remember one day when he stopped by my office and casually mentioned during our conversation that after graduation, he planned to get a job in business. Now this is á shameful confession to make to a group of my colleagues, but my immediate reaction was to think to myself, "Job? But you don't write well. You can't get a job." After all, according to the 1980's surge of research on writing in the workplace, writing is a very important part of most post-graduate jobs and according to Anderson (1985), employees will be expected to produce clear, concise, well-organized, grammatically correct texts. Then I began to think about all the "Jim"'s I have known who eventually passed their required English courses, went on to take other courses and even graduated. That is when I decided to conduct a study on former basic writers in the workplace by tracking down graduates from Francis Marion College, a small, four-year college in South Carolina, for the years 1984-1989.

I collected a list of college graduates whose early grades in English suggested that they had once been weak writers. Out of a four year graduating population of 1,919, 182 qualified as "former basic writers" (FBW's) based on a numerical ranking system which

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was suggested to me by an experienced methodologist. Those who qualified as former basic writers were people whose grade histories included placement into remedial English, repetition of required English courses, and lower-than-C averages in required English courses. As a basis for comparison, I also collected a population of strong writers (FSW's), members of the graduating population who had earned only A's in required English courses and who had not taken remedial English. By comparing the FBW's to the FSW's, I could better see any noticeable differences between the working lives of former basic writers and those of the college's strongest writers. Of the 1,919 graduates in the total population, there were only 62 FSW's.

After finding current addresses from the Alumni Office, I sent the same 96-question survey to both the FBW's and the FSW's, asking a wide range of questions on writing practices, attitudes toward writing and beliefs about the importance of writing at work. Of the 182 FBW's, 119, or 65% responded. Of the 62 FSW's, 47, or 75% responded. I wish I had time to share all the results of the 96 questions with you, but I'll just point out a few highlights:

Almost all the FBW's were employed (110 full-time and 3 part-time). The FBW's were business-oriented although a surprisingly high number went into education (see Table 1). The FSW's, on the other hand, were drawn to education and health. Most respondents in both groups had sought majors and jobs for reasons unrelated to writing ability. (Responses to all the questions are on the hand-out "Frequency Distribution of Responses to Questionnaire".)

Seventy-six percent of former basic writers and 77% of former strong writers reported that their feelings about writing had had no effect on their choice of a college major. Eighty-four percent of former basic writers and 79% of former strong writers reported that their feelings about writing had had no effect on their choice of a job.

Also of interest to those of you who try to scare your students by telling them that they'll never get a job if they don't learn to write well, 69% of former basic writers and 75% of former strong writers reported that they were never asked about their writing skills during job interviews.

Table 2 shows a list of the types of writing done most often at work. These results match those of Paul Anderson (1985b) who has done a lot of research on writing in the workplace. The most frequently done types of writing were short memos, long memos, 1-pg. letters, informal notes to someone else and the filling out of pre-printed forms. During follow-up interviews, the former basic writers' discussed the purposes, audiences, time frames, subject matter and strategies for each type of writing they had reported doing on the survey.

But what really struck me early in the research was what the survey revealed about their attitudes towards writing. If you'll look at the next hand-out, it charts the frequency distribution of Question # 4 of the survey, "How would you best describe your feelings toward writing when you were in college?" The striped bars represent the FBW's, and as you can see, the majority described

themselves as having felt neutral or somewhat negative, while the FSW's felt very positive or somewhat positive. If you'll turn to the next hand-out, look at the responses to Question #5, "How would you best describe your feelings toward the writing you do now at work?" There's a noticeable shift in attitude on the part of the FBW's. Almost two-thirds of them report feeling very positive or somewhat positive about writing at work. Look at the next hand-out. Question #6 asks, "How would you best describe your feelings toward your writing ability now?" The majority of FBW's claimed to feel either very satisfied or somewhat satisfied. Later in the research, I interviewed 21 former basic writers for about one hour each and asked them questions about the writing they did at work. The occupations of the former basic writers who were interviewed included three teachers, two social workers, three sales representatives, two insurance agents, a computer programmer, real estate appraiser, land surveyor, asbestos worker, health physics technician, court recorder, chemist, commericial photographer, yard maintenance worker, and estimator for a construction company.

These people believed they were writing adequately for their jobs and felt satisfied with their writing ability---even though none claimed to be "good writers". They all were very concerned about producing good written products. Through the survey data and interviews, I concluded that the former basic writers were writing adequately because the writing context at work was more writer-friendly than the academic context. The context at work not only helped them write well but made them <u>want</u> to write well.

It must also be taken into consideration that five to ten years had passed since these FBW's had taken their required English courses. We all know the difference between the writing of older students and homesick freshmen. Furthermore, the motivation of a paycheck cannot be underestimated. One FBW, who was a free-lance commercial photographer, said he got paid good money for writing up brochures and pamphlets for advertising companies, and stated, "I don't sit and do this on Sunday afternoon for fun, but on Monday when they want to pay, I'm working!" In addition, they had a large stake in appearing professional to their bosses, clients and co-workers. The absence of grades was also much appreciated. A teacher told me, "At work, you work on it until it's right, and then you send it...there's not that finality of a grade."

In addition, most writing tasks were short, as you can see from the hand-out. We'll look at some samples in a moment. Also, the style of workplace communication is straightforward and blunt, with the content pared down to the essential points. It was also advantageous that most writing tasks at work were routine and repetitive.

All of the interviewees stated that although they had deadlines, they always had more than enough time to finish their writing tasks. With the relatively short length of most communications and the routine and repetitive nature of these tasks, it was not difficult to complete them on time. They also had autonomy over the writing process. They could write when it best fit into their schedules, using processes that best suited

them. The social context of the workplace also helped. By having a job, the former basic writers automatically belonged to a discourse community. They shared the same long range job goals and had the same general spheres of knowledge as co-workers. They helped each other proofread their writing. In fact, relying on co-workers was the most frequent method of ensuring error-free writing. Each place of work seemed to have at least one official "English expert" whom everyone consulted.

There is much more to written communication than absense of errors. What about the global features of written products? As it turned out, these were less troublesome at work than they had been in college.

Let's look at the next page of the hand-out, which shows Kinneavey's model of academic communication. The triangle includes at its edges the important components of communication, "Encoder" (the Writer's persona), "Decoder", the audience, and "Reality ," the subject matter. The interaction of these three result in the "Signal" or text. The additional component of Purpose has been added to Kinneavey's model because Kinneavey states on pg. 48 of A Theory of Discourse, "Purpose in discourse is all important. The aim of a discourse determines everything else in the process of discourse." The problem that many inexperienced writers face in academic writing contexts is juggling these different components. In the academic context, the components are artificial. Though students may be presented with a contrived audience and purpose and may possess some knowledge of the subject matter, they know they

are really writing for a teacher-audience, for the purpose of a grade, and they must consciously search for, select, or even fabricate some subject matter out of whole universe of knowledge. The components of the communication triangle are independent enough of each other that a writing task may create too many choices for a weak writer.

Look at the next hand-out. In my "Model of Workplace Communication", the components are interlocked and do not exist separately. The purpose, or we could also call it the JOB, is inseparable from the subject matter, audience, writer's persona and the resulting text.

Let's look at writing sample #1, a letter from a sales representative to a customer demanding payment. An obvious advantage of this writing assignment is that the purpose is real--the writer really wants that customer to pay up---and more important it is his job to make that client pay. The subject matter consists of the events that took place on the job (or did not, in this case). The purpose and the subject matter of the written communication at work are inseparable from the job itself.

The audience, as well, is closely connected to the writer's job goals. The audience, by having sought this company's service, becomes a participant of the events, and also fits into an audience profile the writer is probably familiar with. The writer's persona is also connected to his job. Since collecting payments for advertising is part of this writer's job, his writing persona is automatically shaped into the appropriate tone of the

assertiveness. Did you notice that he has a comma splice? Do you think the client will fail to take the letter seriously because of that?

Let's look at the next one, a report written by an asbestos worker. Just as in the first letter, the events of the job, in this case an asbestos inspection, have created the subject matter. The writer also utilizes information from his specialized knowledge base of information about asbestos. At work, a writer's subject matter is extremely focused and is limited to an area which he knows something about and is also interested in.

Sample 3 was written by a worker at a nuclear power plant. It is the writer's job to understand radiation. In this writing task, his purpose is to share what he knows with other workers. The subject matter and purpose are already in place and do not have to be "invented" or sought by this writer. The audience consists of co-workers who have some shared knowledge of radiation and a definite interest in not becoming contaminated. Again, the job itself creates the audience. The writer's serious, instructional persona is also a natural outgrowth of the job.

One implication of this study is that we need to reduce as much as possible the artificiality of the writing class and provide our student writers with real audiences and real purposes for writing. The subjects in my study were writing adequately for the workplace, they felt, because they had a strong enough reason to <u>want</u> to write adequately and were willing to do what it took to produce adequate written texts. <u>The writing had meaning for them.</u> Students who are

made to send material to readers other than the teacher, for purposes which have real-life benefits or consequences, will see writing as the meaningful act which it really is. Students who are assigned to send out letters to the editor for the local or campus paper, complaint letters to their landlords or state representatives, or to submit material for in-house publication, such as a class autobiography or newsletter, usually put more effort into their writing and write better than they do when the teacher is the only audience.

Another implication of this study is that freshman English courses should not be used as screening devices which cull weaker writers from college during the first year. Learning to write is a on-going, lifelong process which takes time. Students who are weak writers during freshman year may very well improve over time. Their academic futures should not be terminated during freshman year based on performance in English; their academic futures should be determined instead by their performance in other, non-English courses. If students cannot pass biology, economics or marketing because they either do not know the subject matter OR cannot effectively communicate that they know the subject matter, then that might be grounds for failing them out of college. As my research shows, the truth of the matter is that the "Jim"'s of the college population <u>will</u> be hired if they are good managers, good engineers or good computer programmers. They will be hired primarily for their knowledge of the field, not their writing skills. Therefore, why not let their performance in their other

college courses, rather than English in isolation, determine their futures? (This, of course, implies that professors in other disciplines should be willing to share the responsibility of assigning writing in their courses and referring weak students to the campus writing center.)

One important thing I learned from my study, after meeting this group of people who had not done well in English class long ago, was that we teachers sometimes forget, during classtime and office hours, that we are only seeing one tiny cross-section of our students' overall abilities, namely their written work. We overlook the fact that they have numerous <u>other</u> talents, qualities, skills or goals to contribute to the workforce later, ones which we may never be aware of. If we allow them to remain in college and give them a chance to mature, to continue writing, and to prove their competence in their majors, not only would it be more fair, it would be more realistic.

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TABLE 1

DISTRIBUTION OF JOB TYPES

	# of FBW's	# of FSW's
Business	36	3
Finance	11	3
Education	20	17
Health	3	10
Government	15	3
Other	34	12

	# of FBW's	# of FSW's
Full-time	110	44
Part-time	3	3
Unemployed	4	1
Left blank	2	0

FREQUENCY DISTRIBUTION OF RESPONSES TO QUESTIONNAIRE

4. How would you best describe your feelings toward writing when you were in college? (Check one).

	% of FBW's	% of FSW's
1) Very positive	8.62	39.13
2) Somewhat positive	21.55	47.82
3) Neutral	34.48	8.70
4) Somewhat negative	30.17	4.35
5) Very negative	5.17	0.00

5. How would you best describe your feelings towards the writing you do now at work? (Check one).

	% of FBW's	% of FSW's
1) Very positive	16.96	34.09
2) Somewhat positive	45.53	38.64
3) Neutral	29.46	25.00
4) Somewhat negative	7.14	0.00
5) Very negative	0.89	2.27

6. How would you best describe your feelings towards your writing ability now? (Check one).

	% of FBW's	% of FSW's
1) Very satisfied	11.40	43.18
2) Somewhat satisfied	57.01	47.73
3) Neutral	18.42	4.55
4) Somewhat dissatisfied	10.53	4.55
5) Very dissatisfied	2.63	0.00

7. How much did your feelings about writing affect your choice of a college major? (Check one).

	% of FBW's	% of FSW's
1) Strongly sought	0.88	6.82
2) Somewhat sought	10.62	11.36
3) No effect	76.11	77.27
4) Somewhat avoided	10.62	4.55
5) Strongly avoided	1.77	0.00

8. When you looked for your first job after college graduation, how much did your feelings toward writing influence the type of job you sought? (Check one).

	% of FBW's	% of FSW's
1) Strongly sought	0.90	9.30
2) Somewhat sought	7.20	11.63
3) No effect	83.78	79.07
4) Somewhat avoided	7.21	0.00
5) Strongly avoided	0.90	0.00

9. When you were interviewed for your current job, did the interviewer ask you any questions about the quality of your writing skills? (Check one).

	% of FBW's	% of FSW's
1)Yes	13.64	15.91
2)No	69.10	75.00
3)I don't remember	1.81	2.30
4) Not interviewed	15.45	6.81

10. If you answered "NO " to Question 9 above, which of the reasons listed below best explain why you were not asked about your writing skills? (Check all that apply.)

	% of FBW's	% of FSW's
1) The job I was applying for required very little or no writing.	15.91	12.82
2) The job I was applying for required writing, but the quality of the writing was not important.	7.95	5.13
3) My other skills, such as knowledge of the field, were more important to the interviewer.	34.09	48.72
4) The interviewer assumed that because I was a college graduate, I had reasonably good writing skills.	37.50	30.77
5) Other (fill in the blank)	4.55	2.56

11.In your day to day job performance, how important is it to your job security for you to write well? (Check one).

	% of FBW's	% of FSW's
1) No influence	17.12	11.36
2) Minimal influence	30.63	20.45
3) Moderate influence	30.63	38.64
4) Important influence	18.02	22.73
5) Entirely dependent	3.60	6.82

12.In your current job, how much influence do you think your writing skills will have upon your future promotions and advancements? (Check one).

	% of FBW's	% of FSW's
1) No influence	13.64	9.09
2) Minimal influence	31.82	29.55
3) Moderate influence	31.82	27.27
4) Important influence	20.91	25.00
5) Entirely dependent	1.82	9.09

13. In your current job, how often are you required to write several sentences or more? (Check one).

	% of FBW's	% of FSW's
1)Never	9.09	4.54
2)Once a month	9.09	6.82
3)Once a week	11.82	9.09
4)Two or three times per week	23.64	22.73
5)At least once per day	47.27	56.82

14. Overall, how much of your time at work would you say is spent writing?

	% of FBW's	% of FSW's
1) 0%	5.45	2.27
2) 1-20%	51.82	59.09
3) 21-40%	15.45	9.09
4) 41-60%	8.18	13.64
5) 61-80%	14.55	9.09
6) 81-100%	4.55	6.82

17. Do you ever get feedback on the quality of your writing ability? Check any of the following people who have ever made positive or negative comments about your writing ability, either verbally or in writing.

	% of FBW's	% of FSW's
1) Boss	44.54	36.17
2) Co-workers	43.70	48.94
3) General public	11.76	12.77
4) People from other companies or businesses	10.92	4.26
5) Other	10.08	23.40

19. When you are writing at work, what effect do the factors listed below have upon your writing? (Circle the appropriate number. If any of these factors do not exist in your work-related writing processes, circle NA (not applicable).

	Very Positive	Some What Positive	No Effect	Some What Negative	Very Negative	NA
1) Knowledge of the field						
FBW's	65.14	27.52	2.75	1.83	0.00	2.75
FSW's	76.19	16.67	4.76	0.00	0.00	2.38
15) Opportunities to revise						
FBW's	20.18	28.44	26.61	6.42	3.67	14.68
FSW's	24.39	36.59	17.07	4.88	0.00	17.07
16) Enthusiasm for the subject being written about						
FBW's	33.03	36.70	13.76	4.59	0.92	11.01
FSW's	51.16	30.23	11.63	2.33	0.00	4.65

21. Circle each number below that best matches your feeling about each statement.

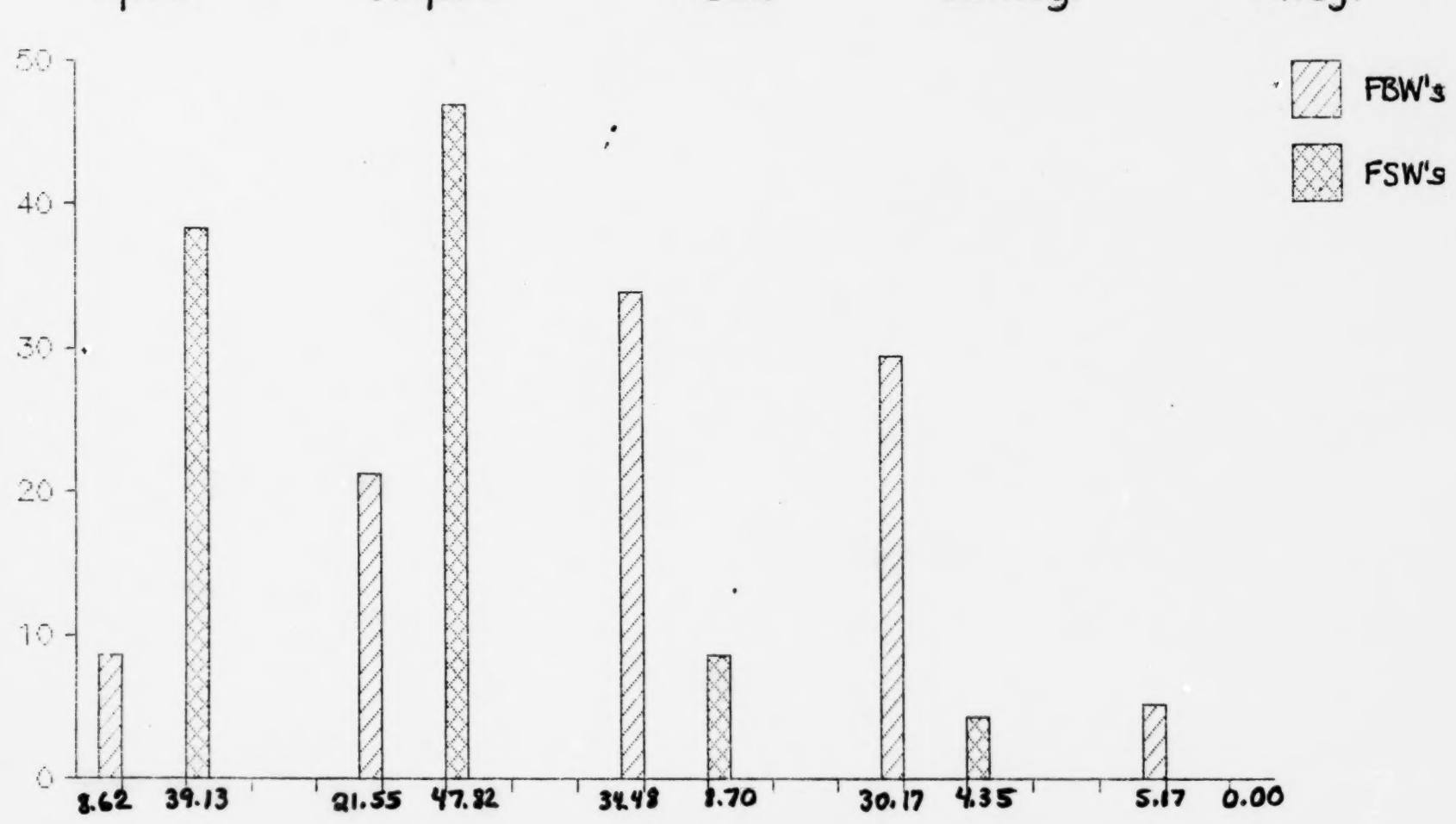
	Strongly Agree	Some what Agree	Neutral	Some what Dis-agree	Strongly Disagree
2. I have no fear of my work-related writing being evaluated					
FBW's	27.03	30.63	18.92	14.41	9.00
FSW's	37.21	32.56	16.28	11.63	2.32
4. I am afraid to write when I know it will be evaluated					
FBW's	2.73	14.55	23.64	32.73	26.36
FSW's	0.00	6.98	13.95	30.23	48.84
5. Writing for my job is a very frightening experience					
FBW's	0.90	4.50	16.22	19.82	58.56
FSW's	0.00	0.00	11.63	16.28	72.09
26. I'm not good at writing					
FBW's	9.90	18.02	14.41	34.23	23.42
FSW's	0.00	4.65	6.98	34.88	53.49

TABLE 2

TYPES OF WRITING MOST FREQUENTLY DONE AT WORK

	Never	Once per Month	Once per Week	2 or 3 times per Week	Every Day
1) Short Memos					
% of FBW's	9.09	15.45	17.27	25.45	29.09
% of FSW's	20.00	35.56	15.56	17.78	11.11
2) Long Memos					
% of FBW's	37.61	29.36	20.18	10.09	2.75
% of FSW's	48.89	33.33	13.33	4.44	0.00
3) 1-pg. letters					
% of FBW's	28.44	36.70	19.27	12.84	2.75
% of FSW's	39.02	34.15	17.07	9.76	0.00
4) Informal notes to someone else					
% of FBW's	7.34	13.76	15.60	26.61	36.70
% of FSW's	4.44	15.56	22.22	24.44	33.33
5) Filling out preprinted forms					
% of FBW's	16.22	15.32	14.41	22.52	31.53
% of FSW's	6.82	38.64	13.64	13.64	27.27

4



Question # 4: How would you best describe your feelings toward writing when you were in college?

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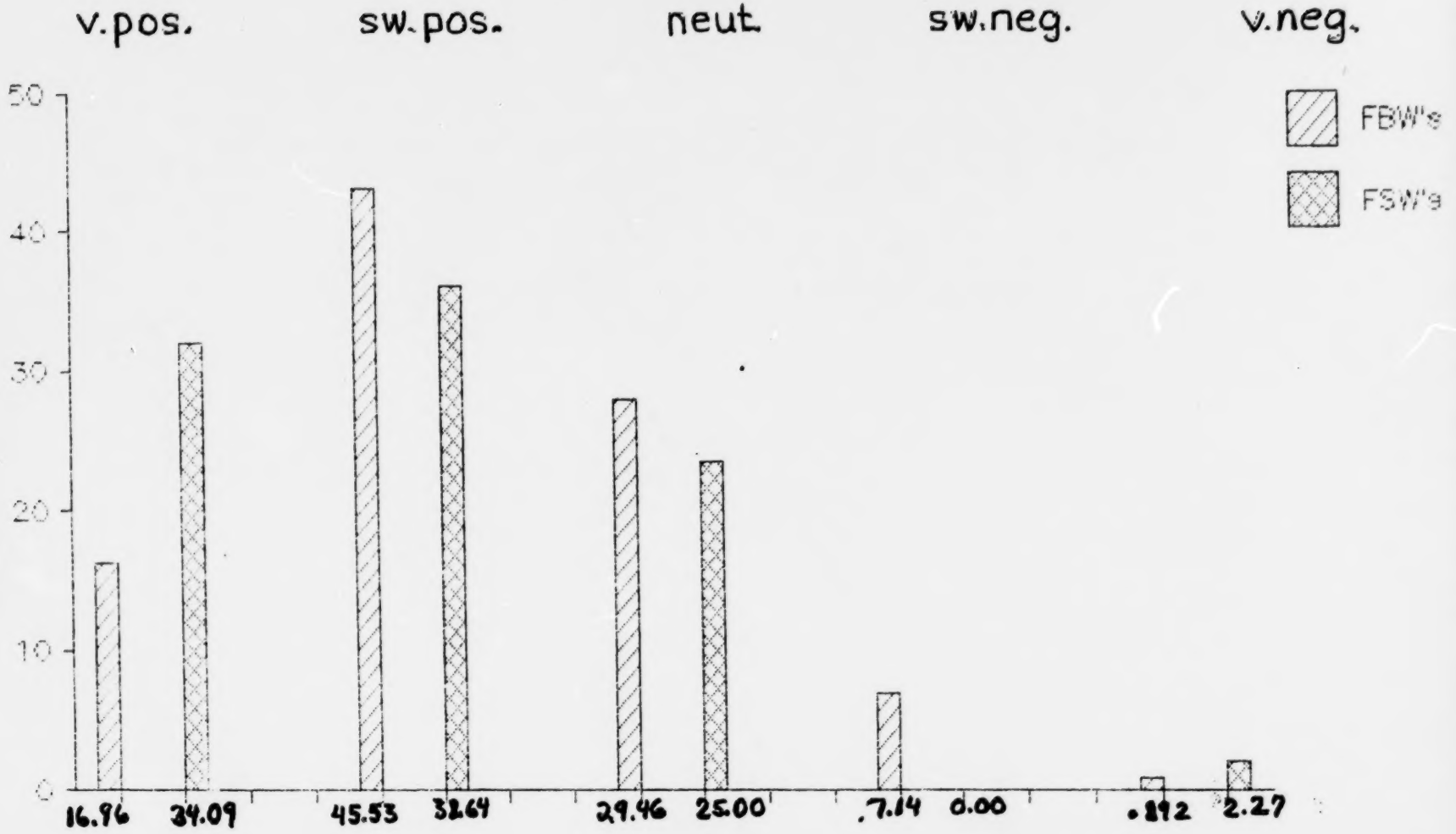

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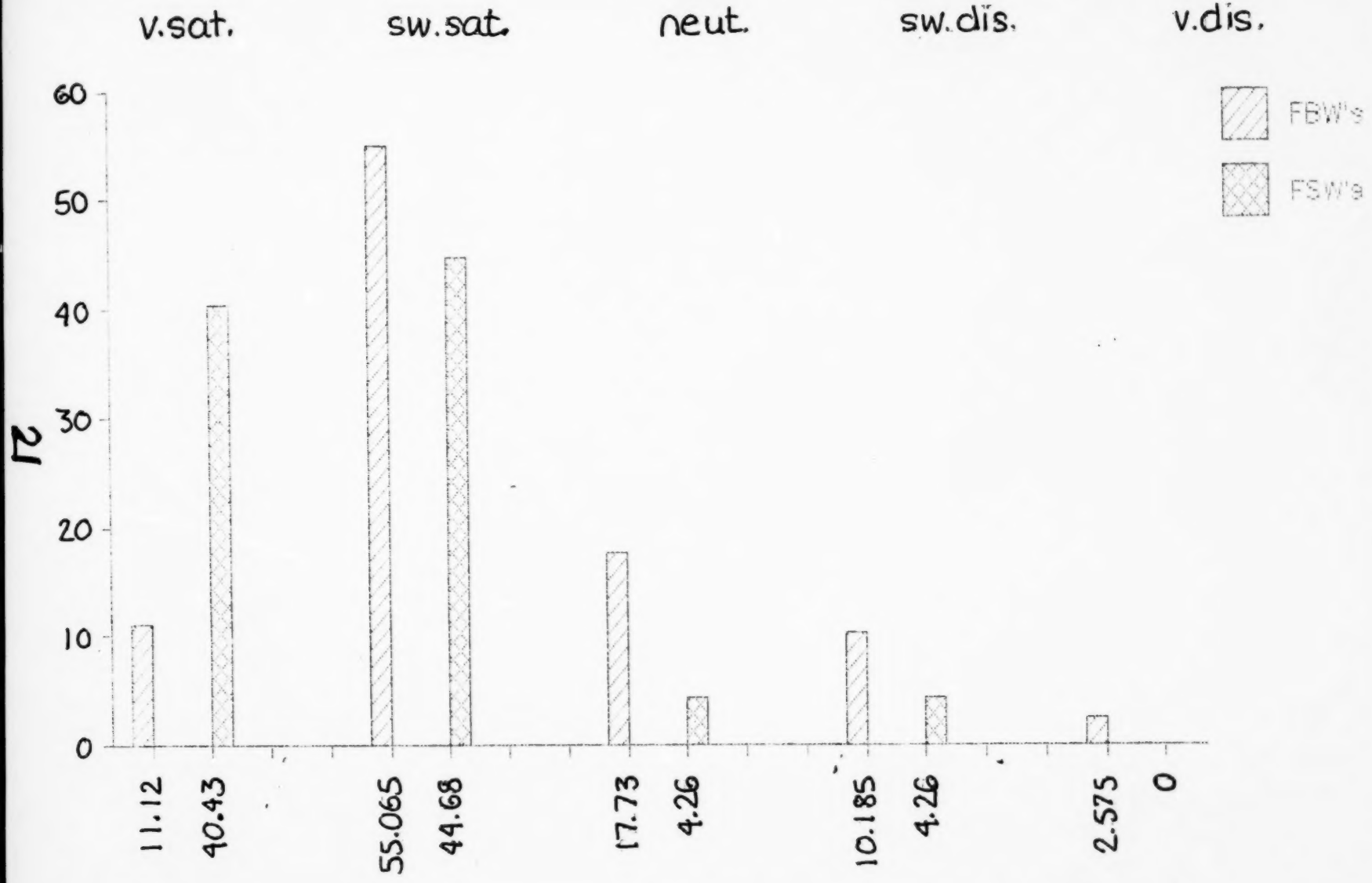
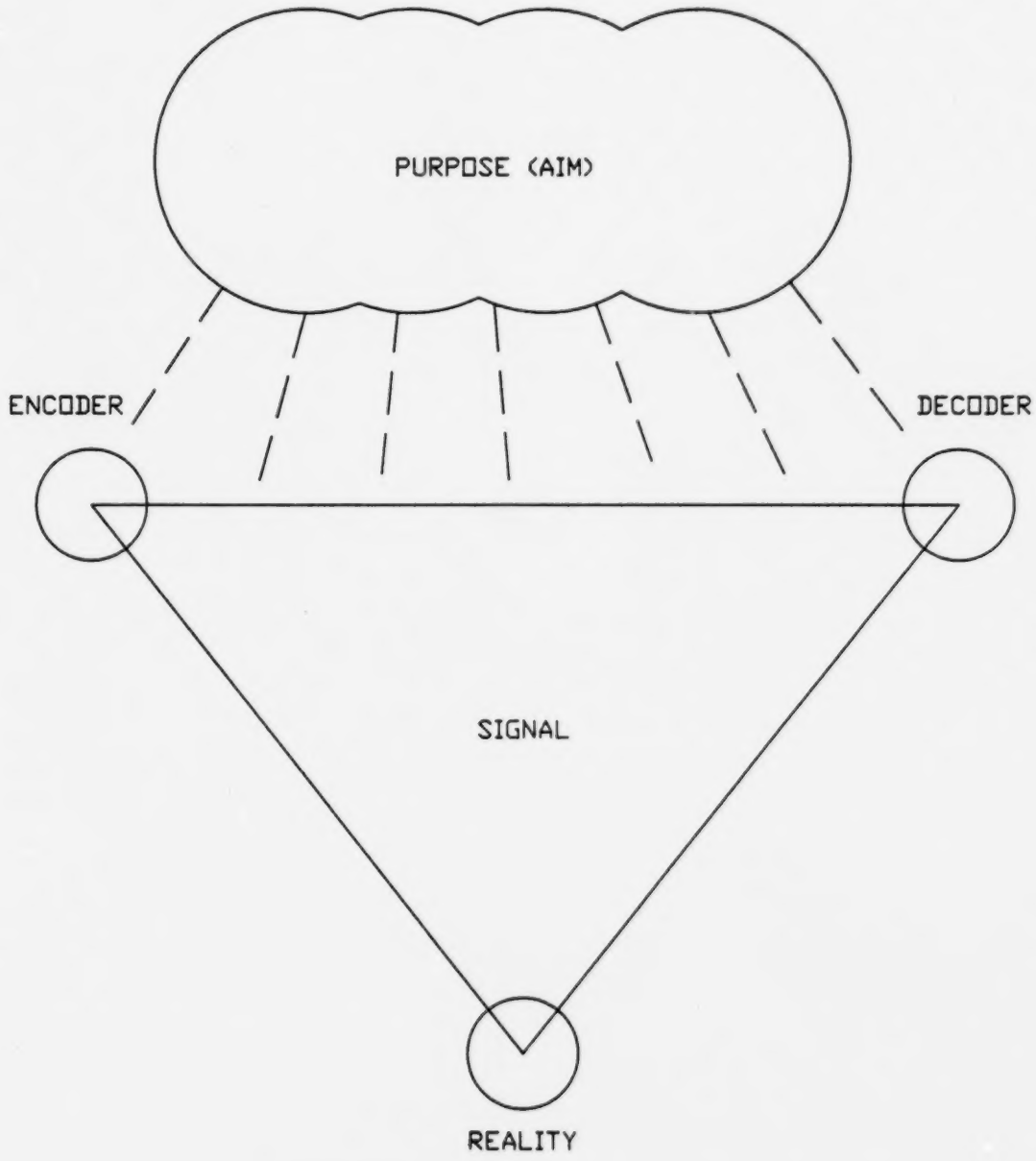
Question # 5: How would you best describe your feelings toward the writing you do now at work?

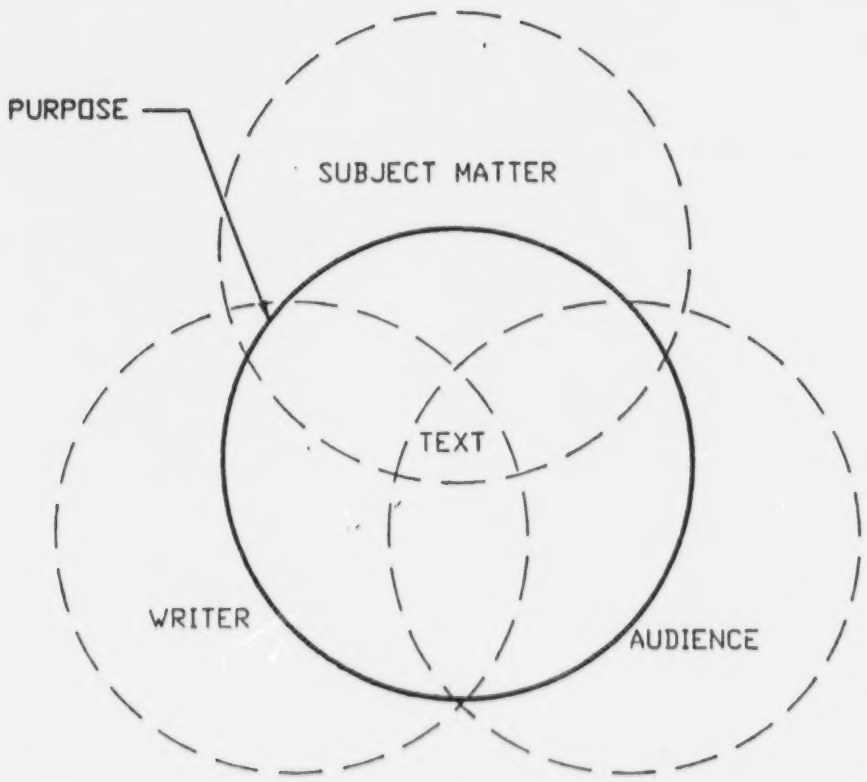
6



Question #6: How would you best describe your feelings toward your writing ability now?



KINNEAVEY'S MODEL OF ACADEMIC COMMUNICATION



MODEL OF WORKPLACE COMMUNICATION

LETTER WRITTEN BY A MARKETING
DIRECTOR FOR AN ADVERTISING COMPANY
(Re-typed to ensure anonymity)

Aug. 24, 1990

-----Company

-------, Florida
Attn: --------

Dear Mr. ----------,

In April of 1989, ------Advertising contracted with --------
Advertising for one (1) billboard in South Carolina for your client, ----------. All terms and conditions were clearly written on the contract which was signed by ----------. Invoices for the space were paid, however, the production charge has not been paid to this date.

On several occasions, I have tried to discuss this matter with ------ who has chosen not to return any of my phone calls or faxed letters. I have enclosed the information which I have faxed -------- in the past with hopes of working this out.

Please accept this letter as notice that on Friday, August 31st, 1990 our attorney will be handling this matter on behalf of -----
--
Advertising. We would appreciate your immediate attention in this matter.

Sincerely,

---------- Advertising

Marketing Director

Enclosures

cc:-------------

Written by an ~~Asbestos~~ worker

Enclosure 3

Observations

The background air samples revealed that the baseline airborne asbestos contamination was 0.0048 f/cc. The building was occupied during working hours with moderate traffic of people moving through the sampling areas. All three air samples were collected with a volume of air over 3000 liters. Each sample was below 0.01 f/cc, the SCDHEC criteria for clean air.

Sample one was collected in Room 298, Mr. [redacted]'s office. The floor was covered with carpet. Sample two was located in the center of Room 292B on the north wall. Sample three was located in the adjacent hallway to these offices on the second floor on the west wall.

Written by a Worker at a Nuclear Power Plant

3.0 PURPOSE: (continued)

3.2 (continued)

3.2.1 (continued)

2. One of the major goals of the Radiation Protection Program is to prevent the spread of contamination to clean areas. Contamination can spread in several ways. Examples are transfer of contamination during radioactive materials movement, fluid leakage from systems by air or gas movement, or by an individual with contamination on shoes or clothing. Routine surveys of areas and locations within the protected area shall be made to ensure that contamination do not exist in normally uncontrolled locations. Surveys shall be made within the radiation controlled area so that the status of each location is known with reasonable accuracy. Surface contamination is classified as being either fixed or removeable radioactive material. Fixed contamination is contamination which cannot be easily removed except by filing, grinding, machining, or caustic chemicals. Normally, removeable contamination can be removed by the use of soap and water. Contamination by radioactive material, is a potential source of internal deposition and may cause a radiation exposure problem.

3. Removeable contamination is usually measured by rubbing a small piece of absorbent paper (smear) over the surface of the area or equipment to be evaluated. Removeable radioactive material which adheres to the smear may be evaluated using an appropriate counting system.

3.2.2 Radiation Surveys

1. Radiation Surveys are taken by qualified Health Physics personnel to determine the location and intensity of known or potential radiation areas, to ascertain dose rate trends in radiological conditions, to allow for maintaining ALARA personnel dose, and to determine radiological controls required for an area.

3.2.3 Special Radiation and/or Contamination Surveys are taken:

1. In areas and/or on equipment when Health Physics requires the information (e.g. potentially contaminated equipment).

2. Upon the request of a Supervisor who may be contemplating work in an area.